

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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TAGS: PGOV, AR
SUBJECT: ARGENTINA ESTABLISHES NATIONAL RELIGIOUS REGISTRY

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1. THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT'S RECENTLY ANNOUNCED LAW ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL REGISTRY FOR NON-CATHOLIC RELIGIONS HAS PRODUCED MIXED REACTIONS HERE. EXECUTIVE DECREE-LAW NO. 12.745 PROVIDES THAT ONCE THE IMPLEMENTING LEGISLATION IS OFFICIALLY PUBLISHED, ALL RELIGIOUS GROUPS WILL HAVE 90 DAYS IN WHICH TO REGISTER FOR JURIDICAL STATUS IN A CENTRAL REGISTRY TO BE KEPT BY THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND WORSHIP. THE 1,614 RELIGIOUS GROUPS ALREADY ON FILE IN THE MINISTRY WILL HAVE TO RE-REGISTER OR LOSE THEIR JURIDICAL STATUS. THE LAW ALSO PROVIDES THAT REGISTRATION CAN BE REFUSED OR CANCELLED TO ANY GROUP WHOSE PRINCIPLES OR ACTIVITIES ARE PROVED TO BE A THREAT TO "PUBLIC ORDER, NATIONAL SECURITY OR TO THE NATION'S MORALS AND TRADITIONS". IN SUCH A CASE, THE GROUP WILL LOSE ITS JURIDICAL STATUS AND BE PROHIBITED TO HOLD SERVICES OR PRACTICE ITS RELIGION WITHIN ARGENTINA. THE NEW LAW WILL NOT APPLY TO THE CATHOLIC RELIGION WHICH IS THE STATE

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RELIGION AND SUBJECT TO AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN ARGENTINA AND THE VATICAN IN 1966. PROCEDURAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW LAW IS STILL BEING WORKED OUT BY ARGENTINE OFFICIALS, BUT WILL PROBABLY BE OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCED WITHIN TWO WEEKS, ACCORDING TO FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS.

2. RELIGIOUS GROUPS HAVE HAD TO REGISTER WITH THE FOREIGN

MINISTRY BY LAW SINCE 1948, EMBOFF WAS TOLD BY ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE FOREIGN MINISTRY'S OFFICE OF NON-CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS NESTOR PARODI ON FEBRUARY 16. THE FORMER REGISTRATION SYSTEM WAS A HAPHAZARD "CARD FILE" ARRANGEMENT AND APPLIED ONLY TO THE BUENOS AIRES AREA. THE NEW LAW SIMPLY EXTENDS THE OLD REGISTRATION REQUIREMENT TO THE ENTIRE COUNTRY AND WILL PERMIT "BETTER SERVICE" FOR ALL RELIGIOUS GROUPS, PARODI SAID. HE ADDED THAT THE SAME EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA APPLIED UNDER THE FORMER SYSTEM, BUT THAT REGISTRATIONS HAD ONLY ON VERY RARE OCCASIONS BEEN CANCELLED. TWO EXAMPLES ARE THE HARE KRISHNA AND DIVINE LIGHT SECTS, WHICH WERE BANNED BY THE GOVERNMENT IN 1976. THE TWO SECTS HAD BEEN REGISTERED WITH THE WORSHIP OFFICE BUT LOST THEIR STATUS WHEN THEY WERE BANNED "BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT REALLY RELIGIONS", PARODI SAID. (THE JEHOVAHS WITNESSES REGISTERED WITH THE MINISTRY IN 1948 BUT HAD THEIR STATUS REVOKED BY DIRECT ORDER OF PRESIDENT PERON IN 1950. THE BAN WAS LARGELY IGNORED, HOWEVER, AND THE WITNESSES CONTINUED TO HOLD SERVICES AND PROSELYTIZE UNTIL LAST YEAR WHEN THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT DECIDED TO IMPLEMENT THE 1950 BAN.) PARODI SAID THAT LEGITIMATE RELIGIONS WILL HAVE NO DIFFICULTY REGISTERING, BUT THAT THE MINISTRY WILL BE ALERT FOR "SMOKESCREENS"; FOR EXAMPLE, GROUPS THAT "TAKE DRUGS". HE DID NOT COMMENT ON THE CHANCES OF THE JEHOVAHS WITNESSES TO REGISTER, BUT LEFT THE IMPRESSION THAT THE GROUP MAY ENCOUNTER DIFFICULTIES. (THE WITNESSES REPORTEDLY INTEND TO APPLY FOR REGISTRATION.) LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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3. THE NEW LAW WILL BE A USEFUL IMPROVEMENT ON THE OLD SYSTEM, ACCORDING TO PARODI, IN THAT IT WILL EXTEND GOVERNMENT RECOGNITION TO PROPERLY REGISTERED RELIGIOUS GROUPS. THIS SHOULD SIMPLIFY PROBLEMS FOR THESE GROUPS, SUCH AS BY FACILITATING DOCUMENTATION AND EASING RELIGIOUS MATERIALS--MATZOH FLOUR WAS AN EXAMPLE HE CITED--THROUGH CUSTOMS. IT SHOULD ALSO HELP PROTECT SMALLER GROUPS IN THE PROVINCES FROM OCCASIONAL HARASSMENT AT THE HANDS OF UNENLIGHTENED LOCAL POLICE, HE SAID.

4. A NUMBER OF ARGENTINE RELIGIOUS GROUPS HAVE CAUTIOUSLY INDICATED SO FAR THAT THEY DO NOT EXPECT ANY PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW REGISTRATION REQUIREMENT. THE HEAD OF THE UNITED COMMUNITY CHURCH SAID HE WAS NOT WORRIED--"THE PROCEDURE WOULD BE LIKE A RENEWAL"--BUT ACKNOWLEDGED THE NEW REQUIREMENT "COULD HAVE DISTURBING IMPLICATIONS". CASTRO

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